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LITERARY ERRORS ABOUT MUSIC

By ARTHUR ELSON

POETS and novelists, for the most part, recognize music for its emotional qualities. They do not realize that music is something of a science as well as an art,—that it needs to be studied in courses, for example, that are fully as formal in their way as Algebra or Chemistry. The average literary worker does not know that harmony, counterpoint, and musical form are based on much stricter rules than the writing of poems or short stories. As a result, the literati often make errors in their statements about music or their use of musical terms and ideas. Some of these mistakes are collected to form the present article.

Among the poets, a few of the leaders have been well posted in music, if not trained musicians; and these few have been accurate in their musical allusions. Milton was one of these. Shakespeare was probably another. The word “probably” is used because of something that looks much like a mistake in one of his sonnets. In describing a lady playing on one of the instruments of the time, which were of the harpsichord-spinet type, he mentions the

“Nimble jacks, that leap
To kiss the tender inward of her palm.”

This passage is decidedly surprising to the musician. The idea of anyone playing virginals (portable spinet) with the palm may be passed over as poetic license. But the jacks, unfortunately, were the vertical sticks or bars *inside* the instrument, which carried the quills that plucked the strings. The jacks were not the keys, which kissed the player’s hand; and when they leaped, they were certainly not able to leap out of the instrument. Later on, Shakespeare makes a pun by calling them “Saucy Jacks.” He may have miscalled the keys purposely, in order to make the ensuing pun; but the chances are that he used the word by mistake. The reason for this is found in the fact that he probably knew little about the virginals or spinet, since he makes remarkably few allusions to them in his plays. Shakespeare was more familiar with vocal music, and some of his plays, such as “Twelfth Night,” literally teem with allusions to it. He was familiar with the lute also, as “The Taming of the Shrew” will show. But almost

the only other allusion to the virginals is found in "A Winter's Tale," where Polyxenes, watching a prolonged handshake given by the queen, exclaims: "Still virginnalling upon his palm!"

Many writers have been practically tone-deaf, and unable to recognize intervals. Strangely enough, it is said that Tennyson was one of these. Tennyson and Browning are therefore opposite in this respect. Browning knew music, but wrote unmusical verse, while Tennyson was unmusical, but wrote poems of the most musical character. Tennyson's "Maud" contains his chief error, in one of his few musical allusions, when he calls for "Flute, violin, bassoon,"—a very poor combination. It will always seem strange that the man who wrote about

"The mellow lin-lan-lone of evening bells"

could not appreciate music.

The bassoon seems to have been a source of trouble for more than one English poet. In Coleridge's "Ancient Mariner," the wedding guests are made to listen to the "loud bassoon." But the word *Posaune*, from which Coleridge took his allusion, means trombone, and not bassoon, the latter not being very loud. Incidentally, Lady Wallace came to grief over the same word, in translating a *Life of Mozart*, and in her hands "*Posaune*" became *bass-trumpet*,—an instrument invented by Wagner a century later.

Browning wrote three poems distinctly about music,—"*Abt Vogler*," "*A Toccata of Galuppi*," and "*Master Hugues of Saxe-Gotha*." The first is a glowing tribute to the expressive power and elevating influence of music, echoing the direct appeal of the art in the line

"The rest may reason and welcome; 'tis we musicians know."

This is an excellent description of the art that is said to begin where language ends. But in the poem there are several phrases that have worried the musicians. At the end of *Abt Vogler's* improvisation, he is said to "slide by semitones into the minor," after which he claims to "blunt it into the ninth." These phrases are said to describe very poor progressions. An example is append-



ed by the writer, and composers are welcome to improve upon

it, thus perhaps proving that the progressions may be made into something good after all.

In "Master Hugues of Saxe-Gotha," the poet casts reflections upon the worth of a fugue which that artist was playing. If intended to question the worth of the fugue as a form, the slur was certainly undeserved, and marked its writer as incapable of appreciating counterpoint. Birrell, the commentator, defines fugue as "a short melody;" a rather startling statement, but one that does not acquit the poet.

In "A Toccata of Galuppi," that individual is depicted as indulging in "Sixths, diminished, sigh on sigh." A diminished sixth would be a perfect fifth. Modern composers use consecutive fifths occasionally, just to show their independence; and Puccini even employs quite a series of them in his "La Bohème." But in Galuppi's day, it was entirely against the law to use them. Some have claimed that Browning meant minor sixths, while others assert that he was thinking of diminished sevenths. Either of these, in succession, would be doleful enough to be considered a sigh. But as it stands, the line is decidedly wrong.

The poet Collins, in "The Passions," seemed discontented with the music of his day, in spite of the glories shed upon it by Händel and Purcell. He insisted, in fact, that some person or persons unknown should "Revive the just designs of Greece." But the poet's real knowledge of ancient Greek music seems to have been a rather doubtful quantity. In the only line in which he becomes at all specific, he indites the request, "Wrap me in soft Lydian measures." It happens that the Lydian mode was the one corresponding with our major scale; so that in spite of the poet's complaint about "Cecilia's mingled world of sound," he was being wrapped in Lydian measures when listening to the works of his own country and epoch.

Victor Hugo did not devote himself to any such survey of musical conditions. He did, however, make a decided error in describing a Haydn quartet as being played by three violins and a flute. Lest the uninitiated should think that this is possible, it may be stated that the viola and the violoncello, which take part in a string quartet, have very many notes that are too deep for either violin or flute to reach.

Poets can sometimes take refuge in the fact that poetic license enables them to deviate a little from the straight and narrow path of truth and accuracy. The novelists have no such excuse; but even after making allowances for this, they seem to be greater sinners than the poets. Perhaps the latter confine

themselves more to matters about which they know something, if not everything.

Adverse criticism of masterworks hardly comes within the scope of this article; but in the case of Ruskin the criticism was given voluntarily. He wrote an entirely unnecessary tirade against "Die Meistersinger," calling it, among other things, "baboon-headed stuff." Such estimates, when put in essays, practically amount to actual errors. Thus Charles Lamb, in his "Essays of Elia," speaks of "The inexhausted German ocean (of music) above which, in triumphant progress, dolphin-seated, ride those Arions, Haydn and Mozart, with their attendant tritons, Bach and Beethoven." This is a decided reversal of the verdict of musicians, who know how far above the other two Bach and Beethoven really were.

The musical novel in English began with "Charles Auchester," that ecstatic British picture of a musical hero, be he Mendelssohn or Sterndale Bennett. It made a sensation in its time. But to-day it seems full of gush and slush, as an example or two will show. The hero was described as a man of absolute perfection, even to the physical point of having a fragrant breath. Again, the authoress says, "Music is the one pure beautiful thing in a world of sin and vileness." The painter's art, she adds, may descend into "sensual bondage," the sculptor may "forget the soul;" and the poet may praise unworthy things. But music, she claims, is free from all these errors. Such a claim is ridiculous. There is good music and bad music, just as there is good and bad poetry; and the poet may inspire men as well as the composer. *Suum cuique*. The masterpieces of one's favorite art will always appeal to him as stronger than those of other arts.

Tolstoi wrote a novel called "The Kreutzer Sonata," in which he claimed that Beethoven's great work of that name incited lewd thoughts. Nothing could be farther from the truth. That sonata is a work of pure beauty, and the evil thoughts existed only in the author's mind.

Many novelists, not writing especially about music, will yet use some allusion to it that is fearfully and wonderfully made, according to the real standards of the tonal art.

The worst example is undoubtedly George du Maurier, whose knowledge of illustrating should have made him treat another art carefully. In his "Trilby," he introduces a series of musical miracles.

Svengali and his pupil Gecko perform the first amazing feat. They engage in a "wonderful double improvisation," though it

is not made very clear how this can be done. Their action becomes more impossible than ever when the author tells us that they extemporized the strictest and hardest kind of music to write. To quote his words, "They fugued, and canoned, and counterpointed." Passing over the fact that verbs such as the last three are not usually made from their corresponding nouns, one is lost in amazement at the mind-reading powers of this remarkable pair. Each would have had to know just what the other was going to play next, and would have had to put a contrapuntal answer or accompaniment to it instantly. Incidentally, composing counterpoint, let alone improvising it, is a matter of slow, hard work.

After this the pair performed "in sordino" instead of "con sordino."

Svengali, also, could transform the most trivial and cheapest tune into something of the rarest beauty "without altering a note." Composers and publishers are longing for someone of this sort.

Trilby herself is not lacking in wonderful achievements. Thus the author states boldly that she could sing Chopin's Impromptu in A-flat, opus 29, a piece that has a compass of over four octaves. Incidentally, she ended the work on E in alt, as if she held that Chopin's ending with C, in the key, was a mistake. The author continued with the startling statement, "Everything that Paganini could do with his violin, she could do with her voice,—only better." Living singers have difficulty in double-stopping, for example, as the human voice is not well adapted to singing two notes at once. The singers of the present might also have trouble with harmonics and pizzicato effects.

There is a waiter in "Trilby" who is more modest in his attainments, and does something that ordinary mortals can imitate. He sings "F *moll* below the line." Probably he did not know that he sang F *dur* also; just as M. Jourdain, in the play, did not know that he talked in prose.

Trilby, in spite of her large compass, is outclassed by the heroine of Meredith's "Sandra Belloni," who could "pitch any notes."

The novelist known as Ouida (Louise de la Ramée) is another writer who seems to have found some unusually gifted singers. One of her characters could give "glorious harmonie" all by herself. Another, a tenor, sang "ravishing airs from Palestrina," who, unfortunately, composed only part-music. Still another rendered pages from the "grand masses of Mendelssohn," com-

positions which the musical world has not yet found. In view of these statements, it is not surprising to find that one of Ouida's instrumental performers had a broken violin "on which the keys were smashed beyond all chance of restoration."

Consuelo, in George Sand's novel, is another performer who does not confine herself to solo work. She sings Marcello's psalm "I cieli immensi," which happens to be four-part music. This singing of several notes at a time seems to be a favorite performance with the vocalists of fiction.

Marie Corelli, in one of her novels, makes Prince Lucio Rimanez state, "an amiable nightingale showed me the most elaborate methods of applying rhythmic tune to the upward and downward rush of the wind, thus teaching me perfect counterpoint." Applying tune to the downward rush of the wind seems to suggest the impossible feat of singing while inhaling; while a nightingale that teaches counterpoint, which is more or less involved part-writing, is a decided rarity. Taken as a whole, this statement deserves the prize for inaccuracy.

Bulwer-Lytton, in "The Last of the Barons," avoids the usual error of giving one voice a number of notes simultaneously. He does, however, go somewhat astray by describing an occasion where "Many voices of men and women joined in deeper bass with the shrill tenor of the choral urchins." At present, women do not sing bass; and the shrill tenor of boys is not a tenor, but a treble.

Thackeray, usually so accurate, made an error, if not a slip of the pen, in describing Beethoven's opera "Fidelio." He commented upon the excellence of the singing, especially in the phrase, "Nichts, Nichts, mein Florestan." That passage, however, is for spoken voice, and has no notes written for it.

The violin, though not as popular with the novelists as the voice, has still received some attention. Thus Archibald Clavering Gunter, in one of his sensational novels, speaks of a nervous tension resembling "the C-string of a highly-tuned violin." Even the most individual of special tunings has never given the violin a C-string. Paganini would sometimes tune up a semitone and transpose the music down by the same interval, thus obtaining the brilliant tone of tight strings without altering the pitch, but neither he nor anyone else on record ever used a C-string on a violin. The novelist adds the phrase "in the breeze," as if the violin were used like an Aeolian harp.

Violinists of great ability are very common in fiction. Thus the hero of "The First Violin" is able to take the post of Concert-

meister because he had amused himself with the instrument during the two years when he was an officer. In a book called "The Dominant Seventh," the hero introduces that chord on a violin, "woven together by pathetic chords rolled out in one shining web of melody." In "A Roman Singer," by F. Marion Crawford, there is a Jewish violinist who obtains from a single instrument "great broad chords, splendid in depth, and royal harmony, grand, enormous, and massive as the united choirs of Heaven." The violin may not have a deep compass in reality, but there is no doubt that Mr. Crawford would have made a good press agent. He is the author who ascribed "La Traviata" to Donizetti.

George Eliot and William Black have joined forces with Browning on the question of consecutive fifths. In "The Mill on the Floss" we are told of "the perfect accord of descending thirds and fifths." Black does not even soften the blow by including thirds; but he follows his predecessor closely enough in describing "a perfect accord of descending fifths." On the cover of an English novel, a series of ascending fifths was emblazoned, —perhaps inciting musicians to buy and investigate.

Both of the above authors have made other strange statements in connection with music. George Eliot mentions a "long-drawn organ stop," which could not be drawn very far, though the phrase may refer to a pause in the music. William Black, in "Kilmeny," states that his heroine "would express faint surprise at hearing Mozart's Sonata in A-sharp." Musicians would be much more surprised; for there is no such key. In this case one may guess how the error arose, for the author may have remembered A as a sharp key, and put the two items together.

The practice of singing and accompanying one's self on the bagpipe is another favorite procedure of musicians in fiction. In one or two old forms of bagpipe, the instrument was played by the pressure of a bag under the arm; but as the instrument is usually played by blowing with the mouth, the gravity of the situation will become evident.

Charles Reade is cited into the musical court for making Peg Woffington whistle "a sparkling Adagio." This is certainly a mistake; but if we look at the rapid notes of small value in the slow movement of Beethoven's first sonata, we may see why the author chose that adjective.

Jack London, most virile of writers, has portrayed the music of nature in its wildness so well that he may readily be pardoned for a rather superficial allusion to the tonal art of civilization.

His mistake occurs in "The Mutiny of the *Elsinore*," where he tries to describe a common-sense, practical, and rather unimaginative heroine by stating that she could appreciate Beethoven, but did not understand Debussy. Granting the ethereal delicacy of the better Debussy pieces, it is nevertheless a surprise to find Beethoven's music considered fit for prosaic people. They would be more apt to enjoy rag-time than to appreciate the sublimity of the fifth and ninth symphonies. Only in a later novel did the author recognize the fact that there has been some discussion about the position of Debussy himself.

The mistakes that newspaper reporters make about music are not always classed as literature; but one or two of them deserve a place in this article.

The first of these has to do with an organ pipe which would not "speak," or sound, when its key was played. It was found afterwards that a mouse had built its nest in a place which permitted the little home to interfere with the vibrations. The reporter at once rushed into print with an account of the finding of the obstruction, the application of tremendous air pressure, and the blowing of the nest out through the pipe. The last two items were made "out of the whole cloth." There is no need of any tremendous pressure in organ or other instrumental pipes. The vibrations are caused by the fluttering of a tongue of air at the mouthpiece of certain organ pipes. It is to cause this fluttering of the air reed or other more substantial mouthpiece that performers on wind instruments use their breath. But the current of breath is not necessary if the vibrations can be started by any other method. Thus if a tuning fork is made to vibrate near a flute of the same pitch, the flute will begin to sound, without any air current passing through it. The organ pipe was silenced because the mouse had built its nest in a position that would interfere with the formation of the air tongue, or air reed, at the mouthpiece. Removal of the nest by hand remedied the trouble.

The second item appeared in St. Louis, when that city had prepared its great exposition. A large organ was one of the attractions. Once, when a certain note was played on the instrument, the skylight broke. The omniscient reporter rose to the occasion, and stated that this was probably not the organist's fault but must have been due to harsh notes played by some stranger. Apart from the fact that it is hard work to play an organ note that will be harsh by itself, the reporter was completely mistaken in ascribing the accident to any such notes. The

sky-light was set in vibration, not by a harsh tone, but by an exceptionally pure tone, that happened to set the skylight into sympathetic vibration. The power of synchronism is not generally realized by the layman; but there have been notable examples of it. A certain factory was found to sway dangerously when its engine was made to run at a particular speed; and the engineer was given orders to avoid that speed. Soldiers crossing a bridge are always ordered to break step, so that their marching may not make the bridge vibrate. Many old instruments, such as the viola d'amore, depended upon synchronism, the playing of one string making another of the same pitch vibrate in sympathy with it. It is even held possible that the falling walls of ancient Jericho were thrown down by synchronism with the Hebrew trumpet calls.

A very popular novel about the achievements of one Ashton-Kirk, detective, made use of the principle of synchronism in a way that can hardly stand the investigation of musicians. A certain villainess, on the inside of a house of mysterious events, was described as giving signals to an accomplice outside, by means of harp tones that caused the strings of a harp outside to vibrate in sympathy. The idea may have seemed clever enough, but it was applied wrongly. In any case the tones of a harp would not cause sympathetic vibration at any great distance; but in the story they were expected to travel through a window, across a courtyard, over a wall, and off into the woods. The author then makes his case even weaker, for he states that the tones used were above the limits of human hearing, for the sake of secrecy. In reality high tones carry less distance than low ones, as steamer whistles will show. These inaudible harp tones would have been so high that their influence in causing sympathetic vibrations could not have extended beyond a very few feet.

Returning to the musical novels, the most amazing of them all is the French story (published in 1837) entitled "The Old Age of William Dufay." The author apparently makes history to suit himself, so utterly does he tamper with historical accuracy. The plot, laid in Paris in 1465, shows the old Dufay, in absent-mindedness, rapping at the wrong door. There he finds Helene, widow of an old friend, with her child. He decides to protect her, and takes her to his home. The housekeeper, fearing for the old man's peace of mind, asks Josquin DesPrés, unblushingly claimed as a pupil of Dufay, to make his master send Helene away. Josquin, however, falls in love with the young widow.

After some time, Dufay, in senile idiocy, sets fire to the house, and the child is burned to death. Helene then goes crazy, and starts to sing old noëls. Dufay perceives that her melody may be made to accompany itself; and he mentions this to Josquin, who, it seems, has already noticed it. The two musicians then join in the singing, using the melody in canonic style. This somehow cures Helene, who marries Josquin later on; while the author makes the startling assertion that "Counterpoint was discovered in this fashion."

These instances should teach authors to be careful when alluding to music; and they show also that fiction is sometimes stranger than truth.